

A NEW KIND OF PRAISE: SACRED AND SECULAR MERGED

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The following article by Dr. Peter Masters, Pastor, Metropolitan Tabernacle, London, England, is from the *Sword & Trowel*, No. 1, 2001. We are thankful that Dr. Masters has been willing to stand up and be counted in this great battle for truth that surrounds Christian music today. The battle is raging in every land. I was not surprised to find Christian rock music permeating churches in Nepal when we returned in October 2001 after an absence of 12 years. Yet, very few pastors have the discernment and courage to lift their voices against the worldly music. Dr. Masters aims at the heart of the problem, which is “the need to distinguish between sacred and secular, or between sacred and profane, or spiritual and worldly.”

The new hymnbook -- *Praise!* -- has already given rise to considerable debate, much of it focused on the selection of hymns and the extent of editorial changes. Initiated by leaders within the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches and the Grace churches, this collection aims to provide a modern hymnbook, shorn of thee's and thou's and incorporating many other features of updating. There is, however, a much more serious problem with the new book than any deficiencies in the editing.

The compilers saw that some churches were adopting new worship songs inspired by the charismatic movement, and were beginning to abandon traditional hymns. They felt that a collection uniting both types of hymn would serve to keep the old hymns in use. But such reasoning could hardly justify the catastrophic compromise which ensued.

Other reviewers have expertly and often severely criticised the hymns chosen, and the degree of editorial change. This reviewer will not add any further observations of this kind except to say that he believes some modernising and simplifying of hymns is needed, but not to the extent carried out by *Praise!*

However, if the only problem with *Praise!* was its editorial changes, this review would never have been written. If Christians want to sing from an over-modernised book, whatever our personal tastes, we would not dream of distancing ourselves from them.

Our major problem with this new hymnbook is not about updated language -- it is about something vastly more serious. This problem becomes horribly obvious as soon as one takes the words and music together. Then we discover the large-scale incorporation of

worldly-idiom, worldly-ethos music -- the music of so-called contemporary Christian worship.

The essence of the 'Christian hippie' and charismatic-song culture of the sixties, and the 'worldly Christians' entertainment-style worship of the seventies (disapproved of by so many conservative and certainly reformed evangelicals right up to the eighties) is by this book 'officially' embraced, and endorsed by leading lights of FIEC and Grace churches. This will do immense harm.

***PRAISE!* STATES ITS POLICY**

An article by Tim Grass (on the *Praise!* web site) shows that this adoption of new-style worship was a fundamental aim of the compilers. He speaks of how churches were coming to feel that traditional hymnbooks did not satisfy their new 'musical ethos'.

Significantly, he speaks of 'increasing acceptability of music styles previously ruled inappropriate for corporate worship'. Why were they once ruled inappropriate? Were the churches wrong in feeling that these music styles were worldly, and intrinsically sinful? There is no discussion of this, or of why time-honoured convictions have been abandoned. It is simply accepted that many churches have changed their tastes, and so *Praise!* is willing to cater for them.

Tim Grass tells us clearly that *Praise!* would 'employ a variety of musical genres', and be the first of its kind in traditional Free Church circles to combine the old and new styles of worship. It would present 'the best of the worship songs being produced by charismatic writers', and also new compositions 'such as the "folk song" type of material coming from the Iona Community and others'.

A RULING PRINCIPLE

A ruling principle in Christian worship for generations was the need to distinguish between sacred and secular, or between sacred and profane, or spiritual and worldly. The 'culture' of the house of God must be joyful, yet at the same time honour the deeply reverent ethos of biblical worship.

Until recently, evangelicals believed that the church and the world represented opposing standards and lifestyles and tastes, and so most of the world's popular jollities were treated with great suspicion. Spiritual worship was never to be confused or mixed with, or even tainted by, the debased end of the popular entertainment spectrum, because one belonged to the realm of sacred things, and the other to the realm of secular and profane things. All were convinced that Almighty God would be offended, and realised that lost sinners could not be called out of the world by a church that had adopted its lifestyle and entertainment values.

It was believed by virtually every serious Christian that to employ in worship something that was obviously associated with (or had arisen from) an alternative culture of free sex, godlessness, drugs, and emotional orgies would be worse than inappropriate -- it would be sinful.

Christians of the recent past saw that two different worlds and kingdoms stood in stark contrast to one another, the churches being the upholders of God's sovereignty, and holiness. They represented the Holy and the High. They therefore disclaimed the help of a fleshly world and its idiom, relying instead on the power of God, and so they had spiritual power in their worship, not the carnal 'power' of entertainment-emotionalism.

As if to test the convictions of believers the hippie and worldly Christian movements came into being, and initially, most conservative evangelicals were appalled. Why are they not all still appalled?

Quickly, the new trends were picked up by leaders of youth groups, shallow churches, and certain international evangelists who had come to put earthly appeal before the standards of the Lord.

The 'Cliff Richard' culture came steadily in, until in 1969 the star himself led an Evangelical Alliance charity pop concert at the Albert Hall. (Most FIEC and Grace churches were still horrified at this point.)

THE UNTHINKABLE HAPPENS

Soon the unthinkable began to happen, and in due course the Grace Mission incorporated contemporary worship songs at their annual meeting, apparently without many complaints. (The Metropolitan Tabernacle, which freely lent its building for these meetings, was increasingly embarrassed by what was going on; and after appeals to the Mission's leaders proved fruitless, withdrew its annual hospitality.)

Tragically, leaders within the Grace Mission played their part in making acceptable to their constituency a deeply wrong and corrupting approach to worship. A much blessed and grand group of churches was betrayed from 'the top' into the hands of a new decadence, and the Grace handbook soon showed how many churches were using Mission Praise to supplement their worship.

The annual Caister meetings of the FIEC have seen an even more vigorous promotion of debased worldly-idiom music in the worship.

The leaders of these constituencies (or many of them) gave their approval to

contemporary worship long before *Praise!* appeared, but the latter will undoubtedly serve as a special imprimatur.

Unfortunately, *Praise!* hymnbook will find a ready market in many churches today. Any warnings from us about the betrayal of a vital moral and spiritual principle will, for many, fall on deaf ears. The situation is too far gone. The ‘worldly’ pastors have done their work. The drums and pop-style instruments are already spread out on many a platform and the show is rolling. Christian people on every hand are already complaining (with great sorrow) about the deafening noise of this so-called worship in their churches.

Praise! will enable those who compromise their worship to imagine that they still honour traditional hymns while they indulge new-style worship. This is one of the ways the old denominational hymnbooks brought down their constituencies, by mixing evangelical and liberal hymns in the same book. *Praise!* does it by mixing the sacred music idiom with the profane.

Those who are against *Praise!* have been accused of merely wanting to maintain eighteenth and nineteenth-century worship. We are accused of using only the King James Version of the Bible, and of praying in archaic language. We apparently have antiquarian tastes, and that lies behind our views. It is merely a matter of taste and of generation.

This is completely untrue, as the promoters of *Praise!* know full well. Many of those who are deeply disturbed by new-style worship use modern translations, and have long since dropped thee’s and thou’s in prayer. Those of us who still prefer the ‘reverent tense’ in prayer, and use the KJV, offer no criticism of what others do. [Note from Brother Cloud: I do not agree with Dr. Masters if he is saying that we should not make an issue of Bible versions.] This is not the issue at all. It is dishonest for the promoters of new-style worship to tell people that this is all a matter of taste. It is a matter of biblical principle.

CALLED OUT OF THE WORLD

The father of the faithful, Abraham, was called to come out of the culture of a pagan world and to live his life in an altogether distinctive way for the Lord.

The children of Israel in the wilderness were severely judged for wanting to go back to the foodstuffs of Egypt, even though these were not intrinsically sinful, because God had provided something special for them. The Lord was teaching them to be a distinctive people.

Under the law of Moses the people were taught in many ways to distinguish between holy and unholy, and between clean and unclean, even if it meant the forbidding of things not inherently evil, in order to drill into them the law of distinction and separation. New

Testament Christians have traditionally believed (as Paul said) that these ‘things were written for our learning’.

Almost countless examples occur throughout the Old Testament of divine anger at any form of borrowing from the nations around for the worship of His people. In Nehemiah’s time, a foolish and corrupt high priest gave Tobiah the Ammonite a chamber in the Temple. What an astonishing and shocking act! Nehemiah ‘cast forth all the household stuff of Tobiah out of the chamber’ and thoroughly cleansed the whole area. The very same cleansing is needed today in the temple of Christian worship.

God’s reproof to Israel (Ezekiel 22.26) is surely recorded for this hour:

‘Her priests have violated my law, and have profaned mine holy things: they have put no difference between the holy and profane, neither have they shewed difference between the unclean and the clean, and have hid their eyes from my sabbaths, and I am profaned among them.’

Some glorious words at the end of Zechariah’s prophecy speak figuratively of the worship of the New Testament church, and how the bridles of the horses will bear the words, ‘Holiness unto the Lord’, and even the cooking pots in the house shall be as sacred as the bowls before the altar. [Note from Brother Cloud: We do not agree with the allegorical interpretation of prophecy.]

NOTHING PROFANE WILL INVADE

Whether we consult the Old or the New Testament, purity and separation are ever to be maintained in worship. There must be a marked distinction between sacred and secular.

The New Testament repeatedly commands us to hold ourselves apart from worldly activities which exalt or enshrine sinful acts and lifestyles. This is a tale of two kingdoms. ‘Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world,’ says John. **Wherever this world’s culture distinctively serves and represents fleshly living, it is to be rejected by believers.** Historic, mainstream evangelicalism has always taken this very seriously.

The founders and builders of virtually all Evangelical Free and Grace churches existing before 1950 held tenaciously to the distinction between spiritual and worldly, and those ministers and evangelists, with their elders and people, would be universally appalled at what is happening today in the places they brought to birth. Were they wrong? Were they biblically misinformed? Were they fools, or in pathetic bondage to mere tradition?

Today, pastors and leaders of inferior spiritual substance are wrecking the worship of these churches, and selling them into a progressive worldliness from which they will probably never recover. This is the tragedy of the hour.

Some of the promoters of *Praise!* claim to be devotees of the Puritans, and we are simply staggered, for they would be condemned by every one of them.

Satan no longer troubles himself to make direct assaults on evangelical and reformed doctrine (the harder route open to him) but concentrates on injecting worldliness into worship, so that evangelicalism will lose its essential heart within a few years.

What is the point of preaching or contending for sound doctrine, if the church's practice has submitted to the world and become offensive to God? What is the point of correcting the sails if the boat is irreparably holed beneath the water line?

A FAULT LINE THROUGH FIEC AND GRACE

There is already a deep fault line running through both the FIEC and Grace groupings of churches. This must be said, much as we love and respect so many people in these churches. On the one hand there are those ministers and congregations who keep apart from worldliness, and maintain holy and reverent worship. On the other are those who advocate the use of contemporary, worldly worship and all that goes with it.

Praise! hymnbook is no doubt intended to smooth away the scruples of traditional believers, but it is a foolish aim, because these scruples are based on biblical convictions. **The existing chasm between these viewpoints will soon be forced into a full breach, and, sadly, it will be a necessary division, because biblical convictions cannot live alongside the grotesque profanities of worldly music in worship.** This compromise is terrible. It is deeply offensive to God, and utterly injurious to Christians.

Ministers may continue to preach sound doctrine in the midst of carnal noise -- but they will only be serving Satan's purpose by calming and reassuring the faithful, while corruption gains total control.

We would plead with ministers and churches who have been persuaded to regard this hymnbook as a product of godly thought, to consider instead the full nature of its compromise, and its certain shattering of the precious jewel of reverent worship. May pastors and elders not come into the condemnation of Jereboam 'who made Israel to sin'.

Many churches which have gone down this road in recent years have already become markedly shallow, frothy and indifferent to biblical standards. They have turned their Father's house into a den of entertainers. The writer has many testimonies to this effect, and has seen it in some very large churches in the USA. There, numbers have sometimes increased, but faithfulness and spirituality have plummeted. This is the future for those who defect to the contemporary worship scene.

This hymnbook, and the genre of hymn it embraces, will pull up and lay waste the old paths in many churches. **Those who begin by singing 25% contemporary music songs of the milder kind, will soon be singing 75% of the worst. It will ruin the young who will learn that the secular music scene is now perfectly acceptable -- after all, it is aped in the worship. Separation from the world in everyday life will no longer be a standard** (and this is already evident in contemporary worship churches).

To go this way, therefore, is to be guilty both of great foolishness, and spiritual disobedience. We must stand clear -- not on the grounds of taste, but on the grounds of sin.

This writer cannot understand how any 'reformed' minister could possibly embrace worship by worldly musical forms. Reformation doctrine is all about the worship of a sovereign, glorious, holy God, Who requires reverence and godly separation from that which is intrinsically worldly and fleshly. Every instinct of a reformed believer should be offended by today's flagrant adoption of the rhythms, chords and harmonies of the world's cultural worst.

But are there not some reformed men who have espoused these emphatically and wholly? With great grief we acknowledge that there are; but we can only say that Reformation tenets are in their head, not their heart; in their claims, but not in their allegiance; in their words, but not their deeds. In the days ahead the onward march of contemporary worship will reveal some painful surprises.

FIVE SERIOUS ASPECTS

In summary, this hymnbook is an act of great pastoral foolishness, because its spiritually destructive work in churches is certain, being evident even now.

It is an act of pastoral insensitivity and indifference, because it will cripple the young by destroying any sense of separation from the world, delivering them into the hands of secular culture.

It is an act of pastoral weakness, cringing from holding vital ground for the glory of the Lord, against the tide of worldliness.

It is a callously divisive act, because biblically oriented hearts will not be able to worship amidst these offensive secular sounds.

But above all, it is an act of compromise -- a betrayal of a central biblical principle, historically long preserved, that distinctiveness and purity from the world must be maintained in worship.

This hymnbook is a disgrace to the evangelical cause, leading God's people into sin, and reflecting nothing but shame on its compilers. Its musical culture is nothing less than a desecration of true worship, and we pray to the Lord that by His grace and mercy, many will yet be moved to reject it.

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